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GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE

Present but Punchlines:

Fathers in Children's Television: Industry Toolkit

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Key Findings at a Glance

Our report shows that dads in children's programming are shown just as frequently as moms; they are shown engaging in caregiving tasks as often as moms, too. In short, dads in kids TV are visible and engaged. However, our report also finds that dads are more than three times as likely as moms to be the punchline. The "Doofus Dad" still hasn't been rewritten.

Children form deep bonds with capable and caring TV dads, so writing fathers as more than a punchline and showing them as just as capable and important as moms, gives programs a chance to build connections with children and parents.

19%

The percent of dads who are shown as the butt of the joke, compared to only 5.7% of moms.

4x

Although uncommon overall, dads are nearly four times as likely as moms to be shown failing at caregiving.

13%

The percent of dads shown in a HEAL profession (healthcare, education, administration, and literacy) compared to 21.7% of moms.

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The Business Case

One of the most celebrated dads in kids TV is Bandit Heeler from *Bluey*. He is widely celebrated because he models hands-on fatherhood, joy, and alongside Chilli, shows what an equal partnership can look like. It's no surprise that *Bluey* was the most-streamed show in the U.S. in 2024, according to Nielsen, and it draws parents in as viewers, not just kids. A dad worth watching is good for the audience and good for business. Let's greenlight more dads like Bandit.

WHAT TO DO:

- ☐ **Make dad a greenlight question:** When reviewing pitches and acquisitions, ask how the dad character plays for the parents watching alongside their kids. Shows that parents enjoy too are the ones families rewatch and recommend.
- ☐ **Build dads as franchise characters:** A capable, funny dad can anchor toys, books, and social clips the way Bandit does. A dad who exists only as the joke is a missed opportunity.
- ☐ **Put parents in your audience research:** Add questions about parent characters to pilot testing and audience research, and include dads in the sample, so you learn before launch whether fathers see themselves on screen.

A Showrunner Checklist

Dads in children's television programs are more than three times as likely as moms to be the butt of the joke, and when they fail at caregiving, the failure is usually played for laughs. Their ordinary caregiving also tends to get treated as an event or spectacle, whereas moms' caregiving portrayals go unremarked. These portrayals or patterns usually start with the script, where the jokes and characters' reactions are written.

WHAT TO DO:

- ☐ **Test the joke**: When a joke lands on a dad, ask whether it's funny only because he's clueless or inept. If so, rewrite it so the laugh comes from his humor or wit.
- ☐ **Swap the parent throughout the script process**: Take each caregiving moment or task and imagine the other parent doing it. If the other characters' reactions would change, rewrite it so both parents get the same reactions. Listen for the difference at the table read.
- ☐ **Watch how failures are portrayed**: Parental failures are important to show because they humanize and authentically capture the parenthood experience. Review each parenting failure in the editing process and check that it does not define the parent as incompetent or drive the whole narrative. Keep subtle failures where parents recover or fix the failure with dignity.
- ☐ **Staff for it:** Hire writers, at every level of the room, who know fatherhood firsthand.

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Watch for	Try instead
Dads as a punchline	Let dads in on the joke. When they are tricked or manipulated, show the dad playing along or show him seeing it coming. Keep them funny without always undercutting their authority.
Applause for the bare minimum	Give both moms and dads the same reaction for their caregiving efforts. For example, when dads make dinner or do bedtime, play it as a normal part of his day.

About the Study

We analyzed 149 episodes from 63 U.S. scripted children's television programs from 2024 and 2025, across broadcast, cable, and streaming. We only included television programs with characters who are parents. The analysis included 166 unique parent characters (85 dads, 81 moms).

FULL REPORT: https://geenadavisinstitute.org/research/dads-in-kids-tv-report/.

CONTACT: Dr. Meredith Conroy for presentations, or a session with your writers' room.